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ART REVIEW

'Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings' Review: Hudson River School Headmaster

Cole is so firmly identified with American painting that his oeuvre has rarely been considered in an international context—until now.



Thomas Cole's 'Scene From "The Last of the Mohicans," Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund' (1827) PHOTO: WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

By Barrymore Laurence Scherer

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New York

When, in 1848, the painter Thomas Cole suddenly died at age 47, his funeral oration was delivered by his celebrated friend William Cullen Bryant, the poet and journalist, who recalled the “enthusiasm awakened by...pictures which carried the eye over scenes of wild grandeur peculiar to our country...and into the depths of skies...such as few but Cole could ever paint.”

Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings

*The Met Fifth Avenue
Through May 13*

For those “scenes of wild grandeur” Cole is generally regarded as the father of the “Hudson River School.” The term has for so long designated America’s first indigenous school of landscape painting that many admirers today would be surprised to learn it was initially coined in derision. Cole’s dramatic imagery, like

that of such followers as Frederic Edwin Church, Asher B. Durand and Albert Bierstadt, was being deemed old-fashioned compared to French Barbizon and Impressionist paintings. But without Cole there might have been no Winslow Homer.

Cole is so firmly identified with American painting that his oeuvre has rarely been considered in an international context. Now the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s deeply absorbing new exhibition “Thomas Cole’s Journey: Atlantic Crossings” is doing exactly that.



Cole's 'View on the Catskill—Early Autumn' (1836-37) PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Organized by Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, the Met's curator of American paintings and sculpture, and Tim Barringer, Yale professor of art history, with Christopher

Riopelle, curator of post-1800 paintings at the National Gallery, London, the exhibition and its richly informative catalog depart from our traditional view of Cole chiefly as a home-grown American artist. Instead, for the first time, they examine the English-born patriarch of American landscape painting beside the European contemporaries and old masters whose works he studied firsthand during several voyages to England, France and Italy—especially John Constable, Claude Lorrain, John Martin and Joseph Mallord William Turner.

Cole was born and raised in a northwestern English village begrimed by the coal smoke of burgeoning industry. Among the first works in the show is Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg's 1801 "Coalbrookdale by Night," its rustic, half-timbered houses silhouetted against an infernal sky set aflame by the town's iron-smelting forges. Such a scene formed the backdrop to Cole's Lancashire youth, and suggests why he would later glorify America's virgin, wooded landscape while implying a warning against its deforestation not just by industry but even by agriculture. This is the essential message of his beloved "View From Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, After a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow" (1836), also in the show.



Asher Brown Durand's 'Kindred Spirits' (1849) PHOTO: CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, BENTONVILLE, ARKANSAS THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Cole briefly worked for a Liverpool engraver whose prints of contemporary paintings may have introduced him to fine art. Intent on becoming an artist after immigrating to America with his

parents in 1818, he was principally self-taught and began painting the Hudson Valley as he wished to see it—unmarred by development and dramatically tinged with his poetic fervor. The success of Cole's initial landscapes, including "The Garden of Eden" (1828), prompted him, in 1829, to make his first European voyage.

In London, Cole made a beeline for the newly opened National Gallery, delighting there in Claude's 1641 "Seaport With the Embarkation of St. Ursula," its combination of figures, Classical architecture and soft, crepuscular lighting influencing his own work thereafter. At the Royal Academy, Cole was astounded by the stark ruins and sumptuous clouds in Constable's recently finished "Hadleigh Castle, the Mouth of the Thames—Morning After a Stormy Night." At Turner's private gallery, Cole was awed by "Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps," though not by Turner's crude appearance and manner. Though he would later regard Turner's more radical style with disdain, Cole virtually quotes Turner's menacing arc of cloud as the departing storm in "The Oxbow." And to come upon these great works—respectively lent by London's National Gallery, Yale Center for British Art and Tate Britain—hanging together in the show is to feel Cole's own wonderment and understand the challenge he faced in formulating his own aesthetic.

Cole's ambitious pentalogy, "The Course of Empire" (1834-36)—lent by the New-York Historical Society—forms the exhibition's centerpiece. Magnificently displayed at eye level in its own five-sided alcove, it invites viewers to examine every finely conceived detail of its grand and cautionary narrative. Here, the music-loving Cole produces a psalm of nature as eloquent as Beethoven's "Pastoral" symphony. In retrospect, we can acknowledge that Cole had every reason to fear that his beloved American landscape was threatened.



Cole's "View From Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, After a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow" (1836) PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The show's thoughtfully selected paintings, drawings, oil sketches and related works by Cole, by the Europeans who influenced him, and by the American painters who perpetuated his legacy clarify the dynamic balance between his indebtedness to foreign tradition and innovation, and also his own original vision: Cole's fantasy "Titan's Goblet" (1833) anticipates the surrealism of Salvador Dalí and René Magritte a century in the future.

Ultimately, it is hard to imagine any visitor departing this moving exhibition without a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Cole's extraordinary activity not just as an American, but as an actor upon the world's stage.

—*Mr. Scherer writes about music and the fine arts for the Journal.*

